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ABSTRACT

The basic goal of a reading mangement system (RMS) is to individualize instruction. While few reading specialists would disagree with this goal, there is much disagreement on the question of whether such a system creates more problems than it solves. Among the advantages of an RMS cited by its proponents are: it provides a means of assessing students' needs in reading; it provides a system of organization for teaching reading skills; it uses criterion-referenced tests which help teachers make decisions concerning appropriate activities for each student; and it is helpful in reporting information to parents. Among the disadvantages of RMS cited by opponents are: the shortcomings of the criterion-referenced tests; the lack of sufficient flexibility for students and teachers using the systems; and the failure of most systems to give sufficient instructions on how to incorporate the skills profiles into the everyday life of the school. The disadvantages of an RMS can be overcome if educators carefully evaluate all available systems before choosing one and incorporate the system into the reading program rather than substitute it as the entire reading program. (FL)

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Reading management systems: solution or problem?

Paula Lee Cornelius

Reading management systems (RMS) are a relatively new approach to the teaching of reading. The first RMS was published in 1971. Since then, publishers have flooded the market with such systems, and more are being published every year.

Some of the earlier RMS were actually developed by groups of classroom teachers for their own use and later published by commercial publishers. Other systems originated with the publishers who hired reading specialists to write systems for them.

Purporting to be diagnostic and prescriptive in nature, these systems arose out of teachers' desires to individualize instruction in reading and their frustration at being unable to do so effectively in a regular classroom. The current accountability trend in education has also contributed to the popularity of reading management systems.

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A reading management system is an objective-based organizational system for individualizing the teaching of reading. An RMS will normally contain a set of behavioral objectives or taxonomy of reading skills, criterion referenced tests, record keeping forms, and prescriptive suggestions or activities.

The behavioral objectives state what the learner will be able to do at the conclusion of his training. Some systems have as many as 300 to 400 behavioral objectives to cover the many subskills monitored by the system in the first six grades of school (15). Other systems simply list the subskills covered by the program on a taxonomy chart, rather than stating them in behavioral terms. The behavioral objectives and/or taxonomy of reading skills provide a system of organization for the program (13). A good system will include behavioral objectives for skills which cannot be tested but which are still monitored, such as those in the affective domain (12).

The criterion referenced tests attempt to evaluate whether or not the student has achieved the specific instructional objectives. There are usually two forms of these tests, one for pre-testing and one for post-testing. No attempt is made to compare a student's performance with that of other students (10). CR tests have as their criterion some minimum standard or passing score (9), such as 80 percent correct, which is arbitrarily determined by the authors (15). Performance is judged against the specific criterion score rather than against the distribution of scores of others as in standardized tests (9).

Record keeping forms usually consist of individual and/or group skills profile forms, the purpose of which is to show the teacher which students have or have not mastered specific skills (8). The individual profile form is convenient for conferencing with parents, but the group profile is of greater aid to the teacher when organizing students for instruction in small, flexible skill groups.

The prescriptive component may take several different forms. Many RMS include correlation charts which list specific pages in existing basal readers for each skill. Others include ditto masters and games or kits, along with some suggested activities, lesson plans, and/or teaching strategies. A few systems include a complete instructional program. The function of the prescriptive component is to offer resources from which the teacher can select appropriate methods and materials for his/her class (13).

The basic goal of an RMS is to individualize instruction so that students who demonstrate mastery of certain skills by passing the test will not have to waste their time in further instruction and drill on these skills. On the other hand, for students who are having difficulty in reading, the system will pinpoint their specific skill needs and provide suggestions for instruction (8).

Few reading specialists would argue with the goal of a management system. The effective teaching of reading does depend upon the ability of the classroom teacher to accomodate to individual differences in learning (5). The question is, "Does a management system solve the problem of individualizing instruction in reading

or does it create more problems?" To answer this question, one must explore the advantages and disadvantages of such a system.

Proponents of reading management systems claim many advantages. In addition to providing a means of assessing students' needs in reading, the most obvious advantage of an RMS is that it provides a system of organization for teaching reading skills. Chall (3) states that research over the past 10 years seems to confirm that a system is preferable to no system. An RMS helps the teacher organize the teaching of reading and makes her aware of skill needs that may be taught in the content areas as well as in reading.

The CR tests help make decisions concerning appropriate activities for each student in contrast to norm referenced tests which compare pupil performance with that of the norm group and don't tell much about the students' mastery of specific objectives (10). Since decisions about future instruction should be made on the basis of what a student can do now, CR test results provide indispensable information for making instructional decisions (9).

The CR tests are also helpful with teacher accountability. CR tests are a way of assessing growth according to specific behavioral objectives. Such tests focus attention on instructional objectives and on the specific behaviors which the teacher seeks to develop (9).

A management system can also be helpful in reporting information to parents. The system allows for progress to be reported in a more specific manner (8). With CR tests it is possible to eliminate

traditional grades. Instead, grades would consist of check marks opposite instructional objectives to indicate which skills have been mastered. Growth or progress would be noted by adding more check marks (9). Ransom (13) found that parents are interested in receiving reports based on skill profiles rather than, or in addition to, letter grades.

Ransom also found that the use of a management system in one school district "decreased the need for special education classes, reduced percentages of absenteeism and vandalism, and has increased numbers of enthusiastic learners." (13:1)

Spache and Spache (15) further suggest that such a program can help compensate for deficits in teacher preparation or knowledge. The system is so complete that teachers learn more about the intricate subskills of the reading process than they would with any other approach.

Much of the controversy surrounding RMS centers around the criterion referenced tests. Since the test questions are related to instructional objectives, they do not assess a student's general reading ability. Also, all learning cannot be measured by CR tests (2).

The validity of the tests has also been questioned. Johnson and Pearson (8) point out the lack of documentation to show that the subtests of these systems have been validated by relating subtest performance to any generally accepted measure of a real reading task. They question whether or not mastery of these separate skills will improve a child's ability to read and suggest a need for a

validation study to determine whether or not the mastery of a set of subskills improved reading fluency. They further question whether the items on some tests actually measure what they say they measure.

The validity of arbitrary standards for mastery on the tests has been questioned because it is greatly dependent upon the validity of the test items, the psychological and physiological conditions of the student at the time of the testing, and the relationship between the vocabulary on the test to the vocabulary in the instructional materials in the classroom (7).

The physical or mechanical format of some CR tests has also been criticized. In some cases the directions may be too difficult for the child to follow, and the answer sheets may be confusing. Also, some systems fail to incorporate features, such as scoring masks, which would save time and money (12).

A final area of concern with the CR tests is the assumption that they are based on an empirically derived hierarchy of reading skills. Thompson and Dziuban (17) point out that there is no real evidence of this. Chall (3) questions whether we have the knowledge based on research to arrange the skills hierarchically. Prescott (10) states that there is no clearly established hierarchy of skills in reading. Spache and Spache (15) offer as proof of this the fact that there is no close agreement in the sequence or even in the inclusion of specific skills among the various systems.

James (7) contends that the use of a management system isolates reading from the larger communication concept and ignores the

affective needs of the student. Johnson and Pearson (8) further state that the fragmentation of skills in a management system ignores the nature of language and is phycholinguistically naive.

Chall (3) questions whether such systems permit sufficient flexibility for students and teachers. She points out the need for maneuverability and flexibility for students and teachers for effective learning. Askov (1) found that in the program she studied, no provision was made for bright students. Ransom (11) indicates there is a "need for additional management of creativity, drive, and oral and written expression, and personal intellectual pursuits for all types of children."

Most systems on the market do not give sufficient instructions on how to incorporate the skills profiles into the everyday life of the school (12). Record keeping forms do not tell teachers how to get 25 or 30 students involved in purposeful and productive work at the same time (7). Many systems are really only assessment techniques, and instructional efforts are left to the teacher (15). Cross-indexing of most systems to other materials is incomplete (17).

Some systems do not incorporate all of the various strands of reading skills. This author found that many systems over-emphasize word analysis skills and neglect vocabulary development, study skills, and/or the affective domain. Also, some systems stress only the literal level of comprehension and ignore interpretive and evaluative comprehension. Other systems include skills in grammar which are not directly related to reading.

Most of the other criticisms of management systems center around cost and time factors. Some RMS, particularly those with machine-scored tests and computer-printed profiles which save time, are very expensive. Less expensive systems which require hand-scoring of tests and teacher profiling take extra time. Even the testing itself takes time. Spache and Spache (15) contend that the volume of paperwork tends to monopolize available instructional time.

This author has observed that in schools using an RMS effectively there were certain common conditions: (1) a wide variety of appropriate instructional materials including multi-media materials, (2) a full-time reading resource teacher to direct the program, (3) a reading resource room for central storage of materials, (4) parent aides, and (5) paid inservice training for staff. All of these factors can add to the cost of the program if they do not already exist in the school.

One final limitation of a management system which has not been found in the literature, but which this author proposes, is that the diagnostic component merely assesses strengths and weaknesses in specific reading skills and does not look at the causes of reading disability. Such a diagnosis may be sufficient for determining prescriptions for most students, but it does not meet the needs of the disabled reader. In such cases it is necessary to examine and eliminate, if possible, factors (physical, emotional, environmental) other than skill deficits which may be contributing to the reading disability.

This author proposes a two-step method by which most, if not all, of the disadvantages of an RMS can be overcome. The first step is careful evaluation of all available systems before selecting the system most suited to the needs of the school. Careful consideration of each of the systems with respect to the criticisms offered in this paper would be advantageous to the prospective buyer of such a system. The goal of the system should be to help the teacher with classroom management; the system should fit the teacher's needs, not the other way around.

The second step is incorporation of the management system as an adjunct to the reading program rather than substituting the RMS as the entire reading program. There is no need to discontinue a proven program to try something new. Even though most schools center their program around a basal reader series, a basal series, no matter how carefully developed, cannot provide a total program (6). An RMS can be used as a means of extending the reading program by individualizing instruction with supplementary materials. Ransom (12) found that a management system could be used effectively with varied developmental reading programs (linguistic, programmed reading, basal reader, language experience, i.t.a.).

Spache and Spache (15) point out that some of the objections to RMS stem from the fact that they are likely to upset the status quo of the basal reader world. "It is perhaps characteristic of our educational system that new ideas are presented over-enthusiastically as panaceas for our problems, contested bitterly by those who have a stake in existing practices, and then gradually find their place among other methods." They further state that there is evidence that management systems can serve as useful adjuncts to a basal program.

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